

Curtain of Ignorance

Roger Hilsman, former Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, in a recent speech at San Francisco, made some sensibly modest proposals for American policy towards Communist China. His most important suggestion was that "the time has come to increase communications with the Chinese Communists, specifically . . . on the subject of arms control." He has touched an issue more important than either recognition or admission of Communist China to the United Nations.

For the next decade and probably much longer, Communist China is likely to be our principal adversary in Asia and perhaps even in Africa. Whether our relations with Peking improve or deteriorate, this Administration must eventually find a way to communicate more freely and frankly with the Chinese Communists. As Allen Whiting demonstrated in *China Crosses the Yalu*, in the early stages of the Korean War neither Washington nor Peking was correctly reading each others' signals. There was tragic miscalculation on both sides. We did not believe China would enter the war and they did not believe our goals were limited to Korea.

The same danger of miscalculation is inherent in the crisis in southeast Asia. In the face of recent American threats to expand the war, Peking has now reiterated its earlier position that an attack on North Viet-Nam means an attack on China. At the same time in the November 24 *People's Daily* editorial, there is an allusion to the need for negotiations. Are the Chinese trying to deter us from intervening in North Viet-Nam? Are they interested in negotiations and on what terms? Do they fear an American attack on China? These and other questions are critical at the moment, yet the only tentative answers we have must come from reading between the lines of the Chinese press. Increased communication between Peking and Washington would not, of course, give us perfect access to Chinese thinking; nor would it rule out the danger of miscalculation. But it could improve our understanding of Chinese intentions and it might reduce the dangers of miscalculation.

There are other reasons for improving communication with Communist China. Now that Peking has become a nuclear power, the problem of disarmament or arms control cannot be resolved without Peking. Nor is it realistic to believe that any settlement in Southeast Asia can be achieved without Peking's eventual participation.

The trouble is, of course, that improving communications is a two-way street and there is little current indication of interest on Peking's side. The Chinese for example, have recently announced that they would not discuss nuclear questions within the framework of the United Nations so long as Taiwan was a member of that organization. This can be taken as a partial reply to Mr. Hilsman's speech and is indicative of Peking's present inflexibility. Its toughened stands recently towards both Japan and the Soviet Union are signs pointing in the same direction.

Peking is understandably reluctant to engage in any formal international arms-control meetings at which pressure will be exerted on her to stop testing nuclear weapons. Communist China is bent on becoming a nuclear power because that is the key to great power status.

The prospects for improving formal, intergovernmental communications, specifically in the area of arms control, thus seem dim. Might it not be possible, however, initially to attempt to improve communications on a more informal basis in other areas? The Chinese are vitally interested in American and European science and technology. Would they refuse an invitation to attend a world-wide scientific conference to be held on some neutral ground such as Geneva? Might they not participate in similar informal conferences on both control or trade, both of which are problems of critical concern to them? Might it not be sensible to allow some highly respected Americans to visit Peking informally on a scouting expedition?

At the very least, such overtures, if they were rejected, would demonstrate to the world that it is not the United States which is isolating China but China which is isolating itself. We have not suffered from our informal talks with the Chinese in the Warsaw meetings.

American and Soviet scientists have been meeting informally for many years now at Pugwash conferences. The informal exchange of views at these conferences did not produce any instant thaw in U.S.-Russian relations but they did help somewhat in preparing the ground for the test ban treaty and the Geneva disarmament negotiations. Perhaps more important, they gave each side a better insight into the thinking of the other. Similar informal meetings between Americans and Communist Chinese will certainly not produce any instant mellowing in Peking. But they could be a first small step in the right direction.